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## “Non-Resident Me”: John Bartlet and the Canadian Historical Profession

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### Résumé de l'article

John Bartlet Brebner (1895-1957) fut un important historien canadien, mais l'historiographie a marginalisé et discrédité son oeuvre. Historien des Maritimes, il continua de s'intéresser à l'histoire de la Nouvelle-Écosse, même après qu'il eut quitté l'Université de Toronto pour l'Université de Columbia ; ses recherches sur les premiers explorateurs et sur l'histoire britannique l'amènèrent à développer une approche continentale qui mettait l'accent sur les échanges canado-américains et sur le patrimoine politique et juridique britannique commun aux deux pays. Homme profondément libéral, Brebner devint suspect aux yeux de ses collègues, parce qu'il ne soutenait aucune des deux écoles de pensée nationaliste de l'histoire du Canada et parce qu'il vivait aux États-Unis. Cette attitude le poussa à prendre la nationalité américaine en 1941 et à abandonner la recherche en histoire du Canada. Il regretta plus tard son geste, et ses expériences en tant qu'Américain libéral dans la période d'après-guerre l'incitèrent à s'interroger sur la qualité du libéralisme du nationalisme américain. Après sa mort, sa réputation fut noircie par la publication posthume d'un manuscrit dépassé et par les attaques concertées des historiens nationalistes, qui, dirigés par Donald G. Creighton, cherchaient à discréditer toute étude se servant, même un tant soit peu, de « l'approche continentale ».

# **“Non-Resident Me”: John Bartlet Brebner and the Canadian Historical Profession**

**ROHIT T. AGGARWALA**

## **Introduction**

**I** did not encounter a trace of the nationalist doubts and did not raise that bogey,”<sup>1</sup> John Bartlet Brebner wrote upon his election to the council of the Canadian Historical Association in 1936. It may have been the most hopeful point in his career: as the academic editor of the Carnegie Series on Relations between Canada and the United States, he was playing a leading role in exploring the relationship between his native land and his nation of residence, and was finding great acceptance in both. His election was unprecedented as the CHA apparently had a policy against electing non-resident scholars, and Brebner had since 1925 been a professor at Columbia University in New York, where he would spend the rest of his life. To Brebner it signified that Canadian nationalism, at least as practised by its historians, was growing up, ceasing to be anti-American, and becoming both more realistic and truer to its liberal heritage.

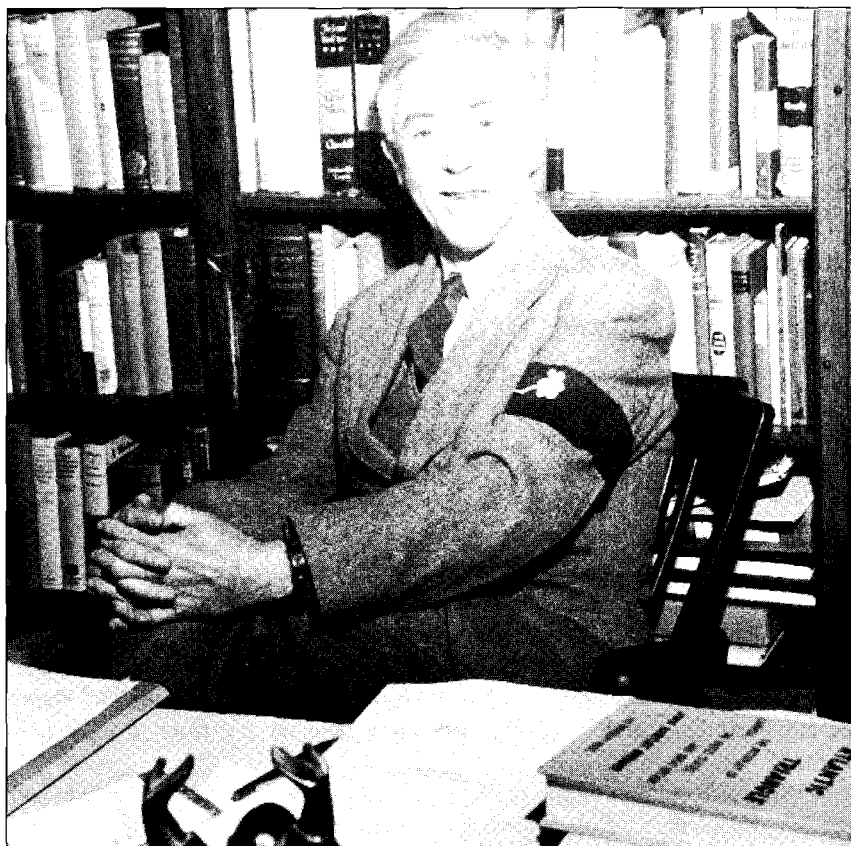
Brebner’s opinion of and relationship with the nationalism of Canada and particularly of the Canadian historical profession would be one of the major forces affecting his life and career. A deep liberal, distrustful of nationalism, Brebner refused to accept either of the “authorised versions” of Canadian history. Rather, he saw Canada mainly influenced by its membership in the North Atlantic community, dominated by Britain and the United States. Although possessed of a healthy regard for the dangers of having two powerful influences and neighbours, Brebner considered the relationships among the three nations generally healthy, and considered their common British political and legal heritage to be their most valuable national characteristics.

Brebner’s work, focusing on Canada as a member of an Atlantic community, allowed his detractors after his death to cite his residence and naturalisation in the United States as the major force shaping his scholarly outlook, and thus

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The author would like to thank Professor Ian McKay of Queen’s University, and the members of his 1995-1996 seminar on the “State and Civil Society in Twentieth-Century Canada,” for their guidance and criticism of this paper.

1 John Bartlet Brebner Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, (hereafter “Brebner Papers”), Box 10, Memorandum, Brebner to James T. Shotwell, 8 June 1936.



*John Bartlet Brebner. The Columbia University Archives and Columbiana Library.*

to cast suspicion on it as unpatriotic or suspect. This is not accurate. Brebner's interpretation of Canada, best expressed in *North Atlantic Triangle*, was shaped by his early work on the Maritimes, by his teaching and writing on British history, and by his work on the early European explorations of North America.<sup>2</sup> While his residence in New York further contributed to his outlook, it is unlikely that it was the sole or even the major factor.

Brebner's "mature" nationalism, however, was not shared by many of his colleagues nor by much of the Canadian public. After his years of work on the Carnegie Series, he gave up on Canada in a moment of despair in the early

2 John Bartlet Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle: The Interplay of Canada, the United States, and Great Britain* (The Relations of Canada and the United States series. New Haven and Toronto, 1945; repr., The Carleton Library, No. 30, with an introduction by Donald G. Creighton, Toronto, 1966). Page references are to the 1966 edition.

1940s, turning down an endowed chair at McGill University, naturalising as an American, gaining tenure at Columbia, and leaving Canadian history as a field of scholarship. Although it would seem a terrible overreaction, the Underhill Affair at the University of Toronto in 1940-1941 seems to have been the major catalyst. In the subsequent years, however, Brebner seems to have realised that he had made a mistake, and he continued to participate occasionally in Canadian academic life, although he still conducted his research on British, not Canadian, history. Not only does it seem that he found greater acceptance in Canada, even as an American, than he came to expect in 1945, but his own brush with American anti-communism in the early 1950s probably convinced him that American nationalism was neither mature nor completely liberal either.

Although the obituaries written after his 1957 death placed Brebner among the most influential Canadian historians of his generation, in later years his reputation suffered and he was eventually relegated to a marginal position. Two forces caused this. The first was the posthumous publication in 1960 of a textbook on Canadian history that Brebner had written ten years earlier and completed in 1951. The reviews noted that the book was out of step with current Canadian scholarship, and attributed that to the author's residence in the United States; none noted (nor, it seems, did the publisher make public) that the manuscript was a decade old when it was published, which probably was the major cause of the book's flaws. The second force marginalising Brebner was the historiography led by Donald Creighton, who cast Brebner as a simplistic continentalist who failed to appreciate either the differences between Canada and the United States or the threat that the United States posed to Canada. A long-time friend of Brebner's, Creighton knew Brebner's writing and scholarly history and undoubtedly knew better; but his interpretation was picked up by subsequent writers who were not as well acquainted with Brebner, and had a lasting impact.

The attack on Brebner, and his own willingness to give up on Canada by not accepting a job at McGill, robbed Canada of its only major historian not to write its history solely as a nation-building narrative. Brebner's Canada was a nation that had agency, was separate from both the United States and Britain, but was also deeply part of a community that included both. He cast Canada as an actor dealing with inevitable influences from abroad – foreign but not alien, because Canada, Britain, and the United States all shared a legal and cultural heritage and on-going ties that made interaction necessary and healthy. Further, Brebner's work on the Maritimes is surprisingly modern in its “microstudy” approach, looking at how great trends affected small communities, rather than looking always at the seat of power, which was the tendency of many of his contemporaries. Had Brebner remained a Canadianist, he might have presented an alternative that would have been a healthy influence on the Canadian historiography of the post-war era.

### The Origins of Brebner's Continentalism

Brebner's espousal of the "continental approach" has been ascribed solely to his residence in the United States, and this has provided some later critics with a rationale for discounting his work; even George Rawlyk, perhaps his greatest defender, wrote that "he had lost faith in Canada; and Canadians were justified in losing faith in him."<sup>3</sup> However, Brebner's concept of continentalism was not solely due to his American experience; it was the result of a more intellectual journey, including not only his residence but also his research and teaching. His published work was part of this process. His earliest work was on Nova Scotia in a period in which it was shaped by the joint and then conflicting forces of Britain and New England. He then wrote a book on the exploration of North America, which, taking place long before modern boundaries had been set, encouraged him to consider the continent as a whole. At Columbia, Brebner was best known for teaching British constitutional history. It is likely that teaching British history to Americans led him to conclude that Americans had a significant British heritage and consciousness. Thus, Brebner's desire to consider Canada as part of a "North Atlantic Triangle" was a result of four factors, only one of which had to do with the United States.

### The Making of an Expatriate

John Bartlet Brebner was born in 1895, the son of James Brebner, the long-time Registrar of the University of Toronto. Growing up in Toronto, he entered University College in 1913, but left in 1915 to go to war. He enlisted in the Canadian Army and was promoted to staff sergeant; he then was transferred to the Royal Artillery of the British Army as a second lieutenant and served thus until the end of the war. Rather than return to Canada, he went to St. John's College at Oxford and graduated with a B.A. in Modern History in 1920. He then returned home to join the History Department at Toronto, teaching, as he put it, "everything under the sun," including early British history, modern European history, and some Canadian history.<sup>4</sup>

Brebner's physical departure from Canada – his move from the University of Toronto to Columbia in 1925 – has been interpreted in various ways. Creighton wrote that "he then accepted an offer to join the staff in History at Columbia University," conveying the misleading impression that Brebner voluntarily left Toronto to take a better offer.<sup>5</sup> In fact, he had been forced out of

3 G.A. Rawlyk, "J.B. Brebner and *The Writing of Canadian History*," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 13,3 (Fall 1978): 86-87.

4 Brebner Papers, Box 1, folder C (1948-1957), Brebner to J.M.S. Careless, 21 April 1954.

5 Donald G. Creighton, introduction to the Carleton Library edition of *North Atlantic Triangle*, xiv. (Hereafter, "Introduction.") This introduction was reprinted as "John Bartlet Brebner: A Man of His Times" in Donald G. Creighton, *The Passionate Observer: Selected Writings* (Toronto, 1966), 160-70. Page references are to the Carleton Library edition.

the department by George M. Wrong; Brebner wrote later that Wrong “‘purged’ [him] from Toronto as a ‘surplus’ Canadian.”<sup>6</sup> The reasons for Wrong’s action are unclear, but Brebner certainly left Canada reluctantly. “I have temporarily, I hope, ‘sold myself south,’” he wrote, “I have an assured future [at Columbia], but as I took up teaching in order to teach Canadians, I quite naturally hope to return to Canada.”<sup>7</sup> That his father was still, until 1930, the University of Toronto Registrar could not have made the departure easier.

Four years later, Brebner was offered an associate professorship at Toronto; Sir Robert Falconer, the University of Toronto president, wrote, “I have had you in mind for a long time,” suggesting that Brebner’s departure had not been universally sanctioned.<sup>8</sup> For the first time, however, Brebner found his career interests at odds with his national loyalty. Professor George Smith in the U. of T. History Department apparently knew of the offer, and wrote to Brebner, warning him away from accepting. He told Brebner that it would be “difficult to fit you into work as interesting as you are doing at Columbia,” adding that he himself was planning to leave Toronto: “for the next twenty-five years I think I shall be happier elsewhere,” he wrote.<sup>9</sup> Smith’s warning had its effect. In his reply to Falconer’s offer, an obviously torn Brebner put his career above his desire to return home: “The possibility of a return has always been in my mind . . . [but] the present does not seem to be an opportune time for me to go to Toronto.”<sup>10</sup> His primary concerns were that, at Toronto, he would not be able to teach his chosen subjects of Canadian and British history, as he was doing at Columbia, and that his possibilities for advancement would be limited. Similar career considerations, most likely his reluctance to be too narrowly focused on Maritime history, prompted him to turn down the job of Nova Scotia archivist, coupled with a teaching position at Dalhousie, which he was offered in 1931.<sup>11</sup>

Brebner’s decision to stay at Columbia did not reflect a disenchantment with Canada at that early date; rather, Brebner was increasingly committed to Canadian history. He published his dissertation and first book, *New England’s Outpost*, in 1927, the year he obtained his Ph.D. from Columbia, and he was already working on what would become *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia*.<sup>12</sup>

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6 Brebner Papers, Box 1, folder C (1948-1957), Brebner to J.M.S. Careless, 21 April 1954.

7 Brebner to Archibald MacMechan, 2 January 1926, quoted in Rawlyk, “J.B. Brebner and *The Writing of Canadian History*,” 87.

8 Brebner Papers, Box 2, folder F, Robert Falconer to Brebner, 25 January 1929.

9 Brebner Papers, Box 2, folder F, George Smith to Brebner, 29 January 1929.

10 Brebner Papers, Box 2, folder F, Brebner to Sir Robert Falconer, 12 February 1929.

11 Brebner Papers, Box 3, folder W, J.C. Webster to Brebner, 21 April 21 1931.

12 Brebner, *New England’s Outpost: Acadia Before the Conquest of Canada* (London, 1927); Brebner, *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia: A Marginal Colony in the Revolutionary Years* (New York, 1937; repr., The Carleton Library No. 45, Toronto, 1969). (Page references are to the Carleton edition.) Although both Maritime books have obvious American history connections, Brebner and his colleagues in both countries considered them more as Canadian history

He also published in several Canadian periodicals in the late 1920s and early 1930s, including the *Canadian Historical Review*, the *Dalhousie Review*, and the *Canadian Forum*.

### Writing and Teaching a Shared History

Brebner's research and teaching at Columbia led him to begin thinking in depth about the extent to which Canada and America shared a British political heritage, and how that heritage got transmitted. His dissertation research began with his asking the question of whether Britain's experience governing conquered French settlers in Nova Scotia led it to adopt similar procedures in Quebec 50 years later. However, while the results of that research did suggest that the governmental structure imposed on Quebec after 1763 was based on Nova Scotia's, it also demonstrated that Nova Scotia's government was modelled initially on Virginia's and modified by the fact that many of the settlers it governed were New Englanders who were used to a more democratic system that the British were explicitly trying to avoid when they selected Virginia's system as a model.<sup>13</sup> He saw that Nova Scotia's politics, its military conquest, and even the expulsion of the Acadians were affected by both British and Massachusetts's defence policy, and that Britain's policy towards Nova Scotia had the secondary intent of demonstrating to disorderly Massachusetts how an orderly and loyal colony might flourish. Thus, Brebner's first writing on Canadian history explicitly explored the ways in which various players in Britain, the future United States, and Canada interacted to create the institutions in all three countries.

Brebner's teaching also led him to focus on the shared heritage of the English-speaking world. For 25 years he taught a course on British constitutional history that was considered "a must for all pre-law students" because it stressed the British historical developments that shaped the British legal system and thus the American legal system.<sup>14</sup> A Canadian teaching American students that their own legal system could not be understood without British history must have begun to think about how the three countries' past was so closely intertwined it was difficult to consider them separately.

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than anything else. His later career and interests seem to bear this out; had he considered them to be about the United States, his decision to seek a wider, more "significant" field of research should logically have led him to study colonial and Revolutionary politics and government. Brebner never wrote any work on the United States except in its relation to Canada. Brebner's Ph.D. diploma is in the Brebner Papers, Box 27. The title page of *New England's Outpost* notes that it was his dissertation.

13 See Brebner, *New England's Outpost*, 7-9 and 72-73.

14 "John B. Brebner, Educator, is Dead," *New York Times*, 11 November 1957.

## Exploring the Continent

Brebner's one detour from Canadian history writing in this period – apart from a fleeting interest in current events in Russia as a modern example of peasant-state relations which could be applied elsewhere, probably to the *habitants* of Quebec – was his second book, largely ignored now, *The Explorers of North America, 1492-1806: From Columbus to Lewis and Clark*.<sup>15</sup> A part of the Pioneer Histories series, the book represented Brebner's emergence as a prominent American historian with a reputation and readership in the United States. To write the book, in 1931 Brebner set aside the work he had started on Nova Scotia during the American Revolution, which would become *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia*, and delved mainly into secondary sources.

*Explorers*, published in 1933, shared with Creighton's *Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* a sense of the immense opportunity of a new continent and of small men's attempts to understand and exploit it.<sup>16</sup> The explorers come from almost every nation in Europe; they poke into the giant land mass tentatively and over several hundred years, through different routes; many of them are defeated by the new continent, perishing in wildernesses or ice. As in *Commercial Empire*, the land or, for Creighton, the river “was a colossal presence, men were Lilliputians in comparison. Living on [the river's] shores and responding to its dictates, they were but frail instruments of its purposes.”<sup>17</sup> Whereas his Maritime books gave Brebner the outlook on the North Atlantic, and the sense of the Maritimes as being highly influenced by the two poles of Britain and the United States, *Explorers* introduced him to the interior of a continent and the attempt to understand it and its relationship with Europe all at once.

Much of the reason that *Explorers* is overlooked is that it was a synthetic, textbook-style history incorporating little primary research. However, it was Brebner's first exposure to continental history, and the experience of looking at North America in the period before national boundaries brought him to the conclusion that there were continental contours that should be considered. “My own conclusions have been arrived at ultimately from the source materials which have led me to the belief that there was some unity in the pattern of North American exploration,” he wrote in the preface.<sup>18</sup>

15 John Bartlet Brebner, *The Explorers of North America, 1492-1806: From Columbus to Lewis and Clark*. The Pioneer Histories Series. (New York, 1933; reprint: Cleveland and New York, 1964). Page references are to the reprint edition.

16 See Donald G. Creighton, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence, 1760-1850* (The Relations of Canada and the United States series. Toronto, 1937; repr. as *Empire of the St. Lawrence*, (Toronto, 1956)).

17 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900* (Toronto, 1976; repr.: Toronto, 1986), 214. Page references are to the reprint edition.

18 Brebner, *Explorers*, viii.



## Reintroducing Continentalism

It seems likely, then, that Brebner's initial work on *Explorers* led directly to his appreciation of the continental contours in North American history. He first proposed this approach in a May 1931 paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association (CHA), entitled "Canadian and North American History," which Creighton credits as the birth (or rebirth) of the continentalist school, and which certainly was the spark for the Carnegie Series.<sup>19</sup> Considering the significance assigned to it, the oversimplification it is charged with, and the ambitious Americanising of Canadian history it is said to have suggested, it is a surprisingly modest proposal, wishing not to view Canadian history as a simple extension of American history, but of "matching contours" and "merging the local in the general."<sup>20</sup> "In spite of the tendency of [Canadian and American] historians to lock up their findings in impermeable national compartments," he said, "there is, inevitably, osmosis between them."<sup>21</sup> He stressed three areas for discussion: "(1) the instances where the continental interpretation seems generally valid; (2) the occasions of divergence and difference; (3) the revelations of the interdependence of the two economies."<sup>22</sup>

Brebner's interest in and appreciation for the differences between Canadian and American development give little credit to the idea that he considered the two countries "essentially alike," as critics charged after his death. He identified, as examples, three areas of crucial Canadian differences: the maintenance of the French-Canadian identity, compared with the apparent inability even of the same French Canadians to maintain a clear identity in neighbouring New England; the differences in the legal system and of law and order in general, most apparent in the frontier West; and the greater acceptance of activist government, in publicly owned utilities and other enterprises, in Canada. "There are a good many of these divergences," he wrote, "enough to make quite tempting the idea of taking the developments of Canada and the United States as examples for the refutation of a Marxian or economic interpretation of history."<sup>23</sup> To Brebner, the differences were as interesting and as significant as the similarities, perhaps more so. By studying both, an honest appreciation of what was unique about Canadianism would be possible, as well as an appreciation of what Canada shared with the United States and the rest of the New World. Even the successes of joint continental development could highlight Canada's own agency in its history: Brebner cites the International

19 J. Bartlet Brebner, "Canadian and North American History," *Canadian Historical Association Report* 1931: 37-48. For Creighton's appraisal of it, see Creighton, "Introduction," xvi-xvii.

20 Brebner, "Canadian and North American History," 37.

21 *Ibid.*, 37-38.

22 *Ibid.*, 38.

23 *Ibid.*, 42.

Joint Commission as a "supremely sensible product" of international co-operation, but also suggests that "to the United States it may serve as a reminder that Canadians have been and are willing to pay the economic price of separate political existence in North America."<sup>24</sup>

One of Brebner's Columbia colleagues heard his 1931 CHA presentation and was impressed with possibilities it had for a major project. James T. Shotwell, a fellow Canadian at Columbia who was director of the Division of Economics and History at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, took Brebner up on the challenge for the large volume of research he outlined in his presentation and began to work towards getting the Carnegie Endowment to sponsor a series on Canadian-American Relations. In 1933, the Carnegie Endowment formally approved the series, entitled "The Relations of Canada and the United States"; it was planned to include more than 40 volumes.

The prospects for the series obviously excited Brebner, who became Shotwell's main adviser and the principal architect of the series; Shotwell was in charge, but Brebner contributed significantly in planning and editing the historical volumes and finding scholars to contribute. The Endowment was chiefly interested in the possibilities of the series as an investigation of a peaceful international co-existence to be used as a model for the world; Brebner was more interested in the scholarly contribution the series could make. Although committed to the idea that current Canadian-American relations were good and that Canada, the U.S., and Britain shared a common Anglo-Saxon heritage of freedom and individual rights, he saw the dangers the United States had posed to Canada throughout its history and never accepted uncritically the myth of the "undefended border."

Brebner's initial experience with history on a large scale in *Explorers* and the possibilities of the Carnegie Series led directly to his decision to leave the subject of Maritime history with which he had begun his career so successfully. He finished *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia: A Marginal Colony* during the Revolutionary Years, in 1936, and wrote in his foreword that

The reason why this [subject] had not been done before was that it was properly questionable whether the result, even if fairly definite, was sufficiently important to justify the necessary expenditure of time. . . . Some years ago it was justifiable for an outsider like myself to enter the field [of Nova Scotia history], but with this book I withdraw, interested though I am in what others may find concerning Nova Scotia's effect upon the immigrants [from New England] after 1782.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Ibid., 48.

25 Brebner, *Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia*, vii-viii.

W.S. MacNutt remarked on the “note of petulance in the Foreword,” and George Rawlyk has suggested that “it was as though Brebner had suddenly realised in 1937 that all of his Nova Scotia research was of marginal importance; and his frustration and bitterness broke through his usual dispassionate prose style.”<sup>26</sup> Colleagues urged Brebner to stick with the Maritimes: Arthur Lower wrote to him that “You are an ass not to go on. What better field can you find?” Several years later Creighton wrote that “No doubt Nova Scotian history seems too parochial to you now, but it seems to me a tragedy that you have abandoned it all the same. . . . your books will probably be the only really fine books on the subject during this whole generation.”<sup>27</sup> But Brebner had found his better field in the broader subject of North American and North Atlantic history.

To a certain extent, Brebner’s abandonment of Maritime history was also a shift in methodology, from the local, detailed, and specific to the national (or international), general, and broad. MacNutt observed that Brebner’s exit from the field of Maritime history, on the grounds of its supposed insignificance, must seem “more than a little absurd” to modern historians and graduate students who spend so much time on subjects of “minute importance.” In Brebner’s day, “when professional historians were fewer, the wide canvas was indispensable to the man who wished to make an abiding mark. . . . All Nova Scotia, all Maritime Canada in a critical area of its history, seemed too insignificant to a man of Brebner’s talents in the 1930s.”<sup>28</sup> By joining the ranks of those writing sweeping history with *Explorers*, he had gained a reputation that would not allow a return to the small scope. Ironically, his Maritime books are of the microstudy approach that came to dominate the “new” history of the 1960s and thereafter, and a return to that style later in his career might have helped his reputation; but, at the time, prominence was best achieved by broad, interpretive histories like *Explorers* and *North Atlantic Triangle*.

### Writing Continentalism

Brebner’s earliest writing explicitly suggesting the functioning of a triangle among Britain, Canada, and the United States came in a paper presented at the American Historical Association in December 1934 and published in 1935 as “Canada, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Washington Conference.”<sup>29</sup>

26 Quoted in Rawlyk, “J.B. Brebner and *The Writing of Canadian History*,” 89; *ibid.*, 89.

27 Brebner Papers, Box 10, Arthur Lower to Brebner, 18 October 1937; Brebner Papers, Box 9, Creighton to Brebner, 14 September 1942.

28 W.S. MacNutt, introduction to the Carleton Library edition of *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia: A Marginal Colony in the Revolutionary Years* (New York, 1937; repr., The Carleton Library No. 45, Toronto, 1969), xiii. (Hereafter, “Introduction.”) Page references are to the Carleton edition.

29 J. Bartlet Brebner, “Canada, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Washington Conference,” *Political Science Quarterly* 50 (1935): 45-58.

Brebner outlined Prime Minister Arthur Meighen's ability at the Imperial Conference of 1921 to keep the British government from renewing the Anglo-Japanese alliance, which was perceived as a threat to "good Anglo-American and Canadian-American relations, upon both of which Canada depended for her sense of security."<sup>30</sup>

This article is most notable because it demonstrates Brebner's sensitivity to over-generalisations, his awareness of the importance of security considerations in national and international affairs, and his identification of a Canadianism similar to but separate from Americanism. He warns against interpreting Canada's success at influencing British policy in this instance as demonstrating a constant ability to serve as the interpreter between Britain and the United States, because this incident was "more spectacular than typical."<sup>31</sup> It was, Brebner said, frequently misinterpreted in different ways, but

the really serious misinterpretation of the events was [Australian Prime Minister W.M.] Hughes' flat identification of Canada with the United States. . . . Truly Canadian interest and policy, however, are not so simply to be found. The consciously and unconsciously exercised ability of the United States to bruise Canada, coupled with the natural feelings of a sturdy small nation towards an overpowering neighbour, have made Canada to a discernible degree anti-American and pro-British. Perhaps it took as much courage in Mr. Meighen to risk Canadian taunts of pro-Americanism as to withstand Mr. Hughes. Yet instead of Canadian taunts he ultimately received Canadian acclaim. The reason was that the crisis of 1921 was so serious that it broke through such superficial crusts as anti-Americanism and pro-Britishism. What Mr. Meighen found in Canada and in himself was Canadianism, marked by a vital concern with Canada's position in relation to a rapidly changing Pacific. It is not surprising that Canadian interest and policy revealed themselves to be quite similar to the interest and policy of the United States, for they sprang from a North Americanism whose roots in time and experience were of equal depth in the two nations.<sup>32</sup>

It was in this article that Brebner first presented the sense of Canadian nationhood and Canadian identity that he would continue to hold through the rest of his life, and it was an identity that found serious fault with both the Creightonian British Empire nationalism and the Lower/Underhill Canadian North American nationalism. Canada was a North American nation, which would not always be at one with Britain and the rest of the Empire, just as other parts of the Empire would not always be at one, either; Canadians were not just Britons transplanted to North America. And yet, Canadians were not

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30 Ibid., 49.

31 Ibid., 45.

32 Ibid., 57-58.

Americans. Though their opinions would sometimes coincide because of a shared North American experience, outlook, and community, the United States presented too grave a threat to Canada to identify with it completely. In this article, he took issue with both of the competing concepts of Canadian nationalism as being too simplistic in identifying Canada as either primarily British or primarily North American (or non-British).

Brebner also found in this article the main challenge of Canada's relationship with its two neighbours. Canadian policy consisted of a balancing act, ensuring harmony between the two giants that influenced it so strongly and yet protecting itself from both at all times, although protection from both in the modern era consisted more of ensuring that the giants did not cause inadvertent harm to Canada through negligence than defending against intended attacks. If Canada's interests coincided with American, then so be it; but the article strongly implies that Canadian interests would also differ from American interests at times.

The shared North American experience Brebner mentioned in his 1935 article was rooted in Brebner's awareness that Canadians and Americans had populated the continent in movements that frequently made Canadians into Americans and Americans into Canadians. Marcus Lee Hansen, a noted immigration historian, was working on the subject of Canadian-American and American-Canadian migration for the Carnegie Series, but on Hansen's death in 1938, Brebner took over the task of finishing and editing the manuscript for publication. Although the book was substantially finished, Brebner worked on it for at least a year, and it was to him an important project. Migrations of people across the continent had been one of the major unstudied "continental contours" he highlighted in his 1931 address, and, after nearly 15 years in the United States, he identified with the book's subjects. Being three-quarters "Scotch-Canadian and one-quarter Anglo-American," he "partially represent[ed] a return movement from Canada to the United States," he wrote in 1939.<sup>33</sup> Arguably, the migrants in the book demonstrated his own attitudes to nationality: "North Americans all, [they were] eminently capable of allegiance to one country one day and to another the next."<sup>34</sup>

This was the central core of Brebner's belief in an international North Atlantic Triangle: that political allegiance was easily moved because the three countries – Canada, the United States, and Britain – were politically so similar. This is a lesson with which Brebner would have had first-hand experience. Although he had a long and sentimental attachment to Canada, Brebner was a

33 Brebner Papers, Box 1, folder A, Brebner to Louis Adamic, 13 June 1939.

34 John Bartlet Brebner, "Foreword," to Marcus Lee Hansen and John Bartlet Brebner, *The Mingling of the Canadian and American Peoples* (The Relations of Canada and the United States. New Haven, 1940), x.

true liberal, trying to divorce himself from parochialism and looking instead at nations (or, more accurately, governments) primarily in terms of how their citizens' liberties are protected.<sup>35</sup> In his introduction, Shotwell acknowledged that this was at odds with modern nationalist concepts:

The world today can hardly understand this type of nationalism, strong in its loyalties to community life and proud of citizenship in a free country, but basing both pride and loyalty upon an intimate personal sense of the dignity of man himself. It was a genuine American outlook. Although its origin lay for the most part in the traditions and institutions of English liberty, the United States and Canada alike added to it the vital stimulus of frontier life.<sup>36</sup>

Shotwell's identification that this nationalism was at odds with current concepts was prophetic, because it outlined the problem that Brebner would have with Canadian scholarship in the next several years, and the problem Canadian scholarship would have with Brebner in the 1950s and after his death. It also demonstrated the gulf between Brebner and Shotwell; Shotwell saw this type of fluid nationalism as "a genuine American outlook," while Brebner saw it more as genuinely of the English-speaking world and the British liberal heritage.

Brebner's vision of a "continental approach" was much more nuanced and derived from a much more intellectual process than his later critics gave him credit for. A scholar of Maritime history, a writer on pre-national North America, a teacher of British history to Americans, and a Canadian residing in the United States, this approach was a logical and intellectually honest approach for Brebner. However, continentalism was a direct challenge to the two nationalist strands of Canadian history, and what Brebner saw as an illiberal nationalism in Canada would lead him to draw away from Canada and Canadian history, leaving the field without its pre-eminent non-nationalist historian.

### **"Canadianism" and Americanism: Brebner's Alienation from Canada**

Brebner's alienation from Canada was a slow process, based on his resentment of a Canadian nationalism that, in his view, was almost paranoid in its suspicion of Americans and of Canadians who lived in the United States. In addition to affecting him personally, this suspicion offended both Brebner's strong liberal sense of the value of diversity and openness and his faith in the unity of the

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35 Individual-state relations were one of the major causes of his interest in the Russian Revolution and his 1927 trip to Russia. See Brebner, "The Courting of Dobroi Ivan," *Canadian Forum* 3:89 (February 1928): 527-33.

36 James T. Shotwell, "Introduction" to Hansen and Brebner, *Mingling*, v-vi.

English-speaking Atlantic world. Further, Brebner's continentalism was in direct contradiction to the two dominant interpretations of Canadian history. Thus, Brebner felt excluded by his Canadian colleagues, naturalised as an American, and gave up the writing of Canadian history. However, Brebner regretted this alienation, and it seems that his naturalisation as an American was taken unenthusiastically and even furtively.

### The "Authorised Versions" of Canadian History

Concurrently with Brebner and Shotwell's work on continentalism, two main, competing narratives of Canadian history were emerging from the work of Canadian historians in Canada as the accepted stories of Canada's nation-building project. These found their apotheoses at the end of World War II, but began developing in the late 1930s and can be seen in the various historians' work even before then. The first, that mainly associated with Arthur R. M. Lower and most succinctly put forward in his 1946 book *Colony to Nation*, focused on Canada's growing independence from Britain; it was also highly influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis of American history, which suggested that North America's distinctiveness from Europe could be explained by the existence of the frontier.<sup>37</sup> The other main narrative was that espoused most vocally by Donald Creighton, and expressed in his *Commercial Empire*, the Macdonald biographies, his *Story of Canada*, and, to a lesser extent, his *Dominion of Canada*; it focused on Canada's history of resisting American aggression and the threat of annexation.<sup>38</sup>

These competing narratives were, in many ways, the historical justifications for the two competing strands of Canadian nationalism. Lower's nationalism emphasised Canada's separateness from Britain and its distinct North American character. It identified with the Liberal Party's goals of creating Canadian institutions separate from British ones and finding Canada an equal role in the Empire, and it cast as the heroes of Canadian history those Liberal leaders and policies that encouraged Canada's transformation from a British colony to a separate nation. This contrasted with the nationalism espoused by Creighton, which emphasised Canada's ties to Britain and membership in the Empire as the aspects that kept Canada separate and distinct from the United States. Creighton's heroes were Sir John A. Macdonald and the Conservative

37 Arthur R. M. Lower, *Colony to Nation: A History of Canada* (Toronto, 1946). For a discussion of Lower, see Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, chapter 5, "Arthur Lower and a National Community."

38 Donald Creighton, *Sir John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician* (Toronto, 1952); and *Sir John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain* (Toronto, 1955); *The Story of Canada* (Toronto, 1959; repr. 1965, 1971); *Dominion of the North: A History of Canada* (Boston, 1944). For a discussion of Creighton, see Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, chapter 9, "Donald Creighton and the Artistry of History."

leaders who countered American expansionism and opposed North American economic integration, and his contemporary ally was the Conservative Party. Thus, Canadian nationalism and Canadian history could be said to have split into two camps, one the British Empire Canada "Conservative version" of Canadian history, the other the North American Canada "Liberal version."

Naturally, these narratives were in competition with Brebner's continentalism. Focused on explaining and justifying the nation-state, they were unsympathetic to Brebner's ideas of healthy transnational influences. In the 1930s, they were not necessarily mutually exclusive; Creighton's first major book was, after all, included in the Carnegie Series. However, as the decade progressed, relations between Canadian historians would become increasingly influenced by their own political positions, and by the late 1940s would begin to crowd out other versions.

### Brebner's "Canadianism"

The high point of Brebner's career as a Canadianist came in the years before *North Atlantic Triangle*, in 1936-1940. At the 1936 CHA meeting, he was elected to the council of the CHA. He seems to have been quite pleased by the honour, writing to Shotwell that his election was unusual and should be considered a tribute to Shotwell's work and the Carnegie Series, both for its important place in Canadian scholarship and, as importantly, for breaking down some of the nationalism, anti-Americanism, and suspicion of non-resident Canadians that had characterised the CHA in the past. "CHA reversed its firm, long-standing policy to elect non-resident me," he wrote. "I did not encounter a trace of the nationalist doubts and did not raise that bogey."<sup>39</sup> He went on to be elected vice-president for 1938-1939 and president for 1939-1940.

Brebner wrote little regarding his election to that position, or what he did write has not survived. It is probable that he approached it much as the honour was probably given, as a recognition of the important role the Carnegie Series had played in developing Canadian historical scholarship. As such, it was likely the high point of his career, with a sense that Canada had recognised its position and its shared history and could proceed through the war and beyond it with a sense of its national character far more sophisticated than that of other nations. Deeply committed to the war effort, in 1939 and 1940 Brebner probably felt even more loyalty to Canada than normal because of the isolationist sentiment of the United States.

The optimism of 1936 was reflected in Brebner's 1940 presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association. The speech, "Canadianism," was a plea for a confident and yet mature and unexaggerated sense of Canadian national-

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39 Memorandum, Brebner to James T. Shotwell, 8 June 1936. Brebner Papers, Box 10.



ism. He stated that, despite all that Canadians shared with Americans and Britons and all that Canada had derived from outside influences, there were certain traits characteristic of Canadians. Further, Brebner showed his continuing awareness of the Maritimes and other peripheral parts of Canada by identifying the increasing economic centralisation of the country as an impediment to Canadian nationalism:

The Royal Commission of Dominion-Provincial Relations which has just tendered its report to Parliament would be evidence enough in itself of the second, and more important, handicap to aspirations towards something that could be called Canadianism. We are all acutely aware that in times of peace there are at least five prickly, recriminatory sections of Canada, able to get along together only because of the laxities of federalism. War unites them, but in doing so it generates new strains which when peace comes, rend them apart again. How, for instance, if this war goes on for a long time, are British Columbia, the Prairie Provinces, and the Maritimes going to feel when it is over about the inevitable accentuation of an already unhealthy concentration of Canada's capital equipment and capital resources in Ontario and Quebec?<sup>40</sup>

Brebner continued to speak out as a loyal but thoughtful critic of how Canadian national identity was evolving and the dangers of the course it was taking. That August, Brebner attended the annual Couchiching Conference, and gave a talk entitled "Canadian-American Relations in a Changing World."<sup>41</sup> Only a few days earlier, the Ogdensburg Agreement between the U.S. and Canada had been signed, establishing a permanent joint defence board for the two countries and committing the United States to the defence of Canada. Brebner argued that the war would not change Canadian-American relations dramatically because, no matter what, the inequality in size and power would always ensure that Canada's main goal, even in co-operation, would be the preservation of its own independence. Most Americans would never be able to gain a full appreciation of Canada's contribution due to America's size. Brebner noted that one of the biggest irritations in the relationship was Americans' inability to appreciate Canada's achievements. Given the remarkable efficiency and adequacy with which Canada had fortified itself against a potential German attack, he argued, "it is doubly hard, therefore, for Canada to be treated by the United States as a dangerous liability instead of as a fortunate asset."<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, he argued that the relationship was the strongest imaginable: "You and I know that we could cite dozens of instances of offence on both sides, but they are mere

40 J.B. Brebner, "Canadianism," *Canadian Historical Association Report* 1940, 6.

41 Brebner Papers, Box 8, folder "Couchiching," typescript "Canadian-American Relations in a Changing World."

42 *Ibid.*, 19.

scratches on the surface of a unique monument, whose foundation is the substantially similar tradition from England which both countries have adapted to their own circumstances in North America."<sup>43</sup>

Brebner published an article with the same theme in an American magazine the following April, restating much of the substance of his remarks at Couchiching, and reflecting his awareness that the overpowering size of the United States and the close relationship between the two nations had shaped Canadian sensitivities:

Canadians were not flattered by being regarded as mere northward projections of the population of the United States, for they had a perfectly natural desire to be conceded distinct individuality of their own. To be a Canadian inevitably came to consist very largely in the assertion that one was not an American. . . . Canadians have needed the existence of Great Britain so that by transfusions of material or spiritual Britoness they could convince themselves that their bloodstreams differed in some essential way from American bloodstreams.<sup>44</sup>

Brebner here showed the importance of the lesson of the article on the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. He criticised (even patronised) both those who regard Canadians as Americans further north (Brebner's speech on Canadianism had identified several particularly Canadian virtues, some of which Americans did not share as a group) and those who simplistically sought Canadianism solely in increased Britishness.

Further, he saw quite clearly that the problem for Canadian nationalism and Canadian nationality of the closer co-operation in defence would be in the assumptions it would generate among Americans:

Here is the core of the problem in terms of human relationships. The moment you dramatize yourself as a benevolent protector, you become remarkably blind about the person that you are protecting. Perhaps, the blindness is merely the traditional affliction of love, but it is more tempting to blame it on the rosy glow that goes with conscious virtue. Whatever it be, it is always very hard on the protected, who naturally likes to be active as well as passive, at the same time as it is likely to be a kind of narcotic to the protector. . . . Perhaps the most baffling ingredient of uncritical benevolence is condescension.<sup>45</sup>

The plea in the article written for American readers was for a greater understanding of and respect for Canada; the plea at Couchiching was for Canadians to be confident in their own achievements and patient with their generally well-meaning neighbour.

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43 Ibid., 20.

44 Brebner, "The U.S.A.: Canada's Problem," *Survey Graphic* 30,4 (April 1941): 222.

45 Ibid., 223.

In the late 1930s, Brebner may have been hopeful that the intolerance and suspicion of outsiders he saw in Canadian nationalism was on the wane. The Canadianism he articulated was a sophisticated, intellectual, tolerant, liberal nationalism; it differed from both the British empire nationalism and the North American Canadian nationalism, particularly in its reluctance to be either anti-American or anti-British. It also suggested that Canadians would have to look critically at their own country to find within themselves and through their solutions to their own problems the distinctive characteristics that would define a lasting "Canadianism." But the impending "Underhill Affair" proved that understanding was not to be a characteristic of Canadian nationalism in times of stress any more than it was of other nationalisms.

### **Brebner and The Underhill Affair**

At the same Couchiching Conference, Brebner attended a discussion including University of Toronto Professor Frank Underhill, who made some remarks on the Ogdensburg Agreement entitled "A United American Front." Underhill stated that the agreement marked a new era in Canadian national interests, giving Canada two loyalties, the traditional one to the Empire, and a new one to the common defence of North America. His reputation for being anti-British and anti-imperialist had prepared the audience for an intemperate speech, but those present considered it a well-reasoned and temperate address for him.<sup>46</sup>

Underhill's remarks, however, were reported in several newspapers and some of them, taken out of context, infuriated many of Ontario's staunchly pro-British nationalists, who petitioned the University to dismiss him. The academic community rallied to Underhill's defence, as they had been doing for some time. Innis asked Brebner to send a telegram to the University of Toronto Board of Directors, which he did, writing that Underhill's statement "was truly loyal thoughtful Canadian interpretation of swiftly changing scene."<sup>47</sup> Brebner took the reaction in Ontario to Underhill's speech as an indication of how irrational Canadian nationalism was, although he tried to be understanding: "Canada is going through some difficult adjustments," he wrote a colleague, "for Canadians can't get it through their heads that the Ogdensburg Agreement isn't somehow treasonable to Great Britain. They need to have the Anglo-American world pattern hammered into them."<sup>48</sup>

The Underhill issue died down somewhat in the fall, but on December 19th, 1940, University President H.J. Cody recommended that Underhill be dismissed. Underhill was informed on January 2nd, 1941, and sought help from colleagues and supporters, including Innis, who disliked Underhill's politics

46 R. Douglas Francis, *Frank H. Underhill: Intellectual Provocateur* (Toronto, 1986), 115.

47 Brebner Papers, Box 3, folder U, Brebner to Frank Underhill, 16 September 1940.

48 Brebner Papers, Box 1, folder C, Brebner to Fred Clarke, 14 October 1940.

and scholarship but supported his right to speak. Innis, in turn, contacted Brebner, who responded with a letter intended for public distribution. "I am wondering whether there is much general recognition in Toronto of how serious an effect [Underhill's dismissal] would have down here," he wrote.<sup>49</sup> But Brebner was not optimistic about the help he could provide. He continued to feel excluded from the Canadian academic community because of his residence in the United States. The "old nationalist bogey" had not died down as much as he had hoped, and he referred sarcastically in the letter to Innis to "the sin of being pro-American."<sup>50</sup> He wrote Creighton:

Since Tuesday night a number of us have been deeply concerned over Underhill's dismissal . . . at Harold's suggestion I have sent off a letter calculated to scare some folks a little over repercussions in the U.S. It was about all I could do and it will have to be manipulated by Harold, because the group down here — Scott, King, Gordon, Corbett — are suspect already in Canada.<sup>51</sup>

The idea of being suspect in Canada for his residence in the United States — where he worked to promote Canada and Canadian-American understanding — must have been particularly galling. His faith in the mature Canadianism he hoped for in his CHA address was waning; in February he wrote Creighton that "It is all very sad and I fear ominous for the future."<sup>52</sup>

It is impossible to say whether the Underhill Affair caused Brebner to decide to relinquish his Canadian citizenship and become an American; Brebner was reticent about many things in his life, and his papers contain no mention of his decision to naturalise. It may have been a deciding factor as, at that time, before the United States entered World War II in December 1941, Brebner began to pull away from Canada and rejected another opportunity to return. In the spring of 1941, McGill University Principal Cyril James offered Brebner the Kingsford Chair of History, but Brebner turned the offer down: "my closest colleague here has done much to persuade me that in the difficult period of Canadian-American relations which necessarily lies ahead I can be of greater usefulness in the United States than in Canada."<sup>53</sup> Long having considered himself an intellectual ambassador, he may have found that role more important and more rewarding than simply being another Canadian historian in Canada.

49 Brebner Papers, Box 2, folder I, Brebner to Harold Innis, 10 January 1941.

50 Ibid.

51 National Archives of Canada, Donald G. Creighton Papers, MG 31 D77 (Finding Aid 1374) (hereafter "Creighton Papers"), vol. 1, folder "General Correspondence, 1941," Brebner to D.G. Creighton, 10 January 1941.

52 Creighton Papers, vol. 1, folder labeled "General Correspondence, 1941," Brebner to Creighton, 6 February 1941.

53 Brebner to Cyril James, 2 April 1941, quoted in Paul Phillips, *Britain's Past in Canada: The Teaching and Writing of British History* (Vancouver, 1989), 79.

However, his decision to remain in New York must have held some strain of resentment or disillusionment with Canada, because shortly after refusing McGill's offer, he decided to begin the naturalisation process. In July 1941, he wrote to an acquaintance at the British Library of Information in New York that "I am proceeding to American citizenship."<sup>54</sup> The following January, he sought Creighton's help in selling his Madawaska Club cottage at Go Home Bay, Ontario, citing the difficulty of the long journey from New York and wartime restrictions on auto travel. Creighton offered some help, but noted that "it does seem unfortunate, though necessary that you should have to pull up stakes completely from the Canadian north."<sup>55</sup>

It would seem odd for Brebner, who stressed the need for understanding and patience in dealing with international affairs, to react so strongly to the Underhill Affair as to relinquish his Canadian citizenship. Perhaps the Underhill Affair convinced Brebner that the nationalism he feared had not waned as he had thought; perhaps it reminded him that his status as an outsider, a Canadianist at an American university, had not been overcome by his role in the CHA. Nonetheless, the decision was taken quickly. In May 1940, Brebner was discussing Canadianism with his fellow Canadian historians as their president, probing with them what their shared identity meant; fourteen months later, he was writing that he was becoming an American citizen, and six months thereafter he was selling his only property in Canada and his main reason for frequent visits to his native country. No other event – not the war, certainly, which Brebner strongly supported – can explain the rapid turnaround in his loyalties. Brebner's wife, Adele Rumpf Brebner, was an American, but they had married in 1928 and that had not prompted him to naturalise.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Brebner became a full professor at Columbia in 1942, but it seems unlikely that citizenship was a requirement for tenure.<sup>57</sup> Unless as CHA president Brebner

54 Brebner Papers, Box 2, folder G, Brebner to Harley Granville-Barker, 9 July 1941.

55 Creighton Papers, vol. 1, folder "General Correspondence, 1942, 1," Creighton to Brebner, 10 February 1942.

56 "John B. Brebner, Educator, is Dead," *New York Times*, 11 November 1957; Columbia University Archives and Columbiana Collection, Biographical Ephemera File for John B. Brebner, typescript by Ann Nauman, "John Bartlet Brebner," 1968. Brebner's wife was a professor of comparative literature at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, where the Brebners lived for many years. Adele Brebner died in 1960; see the obituary for Adele Rumpf Brebner, *New York Herald Tribune*, 31 July 1960; a copy is in the Brebner Biographical Ephemera file in the Columbia University Archives.

57 Columbia University Archives and Columbiana Collection University, Appointment Cards for John B. Brebner. Just above the notation of Brebner's promotion to full professor is a stamp "Oath Filed"; it is unclear what that oath was for, nor is it known whether any loyalty oath was a requirement for tenure. Either way, it was apparently not necessary for the various positions of Lecturer, Assistant Professor, and Associate Professor that Brebner had held at Columbia since 1925 as a Canadian citizen.

was already planning on becoming an American and discussed Canadianism either as a smokescreen or because he was under pressure to speak on that issue, possibilities that would be totally out of character for the man, the Underhill affair confirmed the fear, evident in his address, that Canadian nationalism during and after the war was to be a narrow-minded, dogmatic one antithetical to his liberal notions and his sense of freedom, political and academic. Despite the close co-operation between Canada and the United States during the war, the nationalist historians had triumphed: V-J Day would find J. Bartlet Brebner an American without further plans to write Canadian history.

### **Success, Regret, and Sympathy: Brebner as a Canadian-American**

After his naturalisation, Brebner continued to work on the final book of the Carnegie Series, his own *North Atlantic Triangle*. Although the book was successful, the timing of its publication, coinciding with the beginning of the Cold War and the formation of NATO, led many to overlook its major implications for Canadian history. Further, Brebner's own feelings towards the Canadian historical community, especially a developing estrangement with Creighton, led him to give up the field and switch his research to British topics, thus missing the opportunity to write further on applying the North Atlantic concept to Canadian history. After the war, Canada proved to be more receptive to Brebner than he had expected at his naturalisation, and he keenly regretted the distance he felt between himself and his native land, and probably regretted leaving Canadian history. Further, America's post-war nationalistic excesses led him to give greater credence to Canadian criticisms of the United States, and probably to question his own earlier view of American nationalism as more mature than Canadian.

### **The North Atlantic Triangle, Book and Alliance**

Brebner's disillusionment with Canada was not complete; he retained a deep feeling for it and continued to work towards better Canadian-American understanding. He took his role as goodwill ambassador very seriously, using his contacts as a member of New York's intellectual community to recommend Canadian authors to the *New York Times Book Review* and suggest that NBC radio broadcast Canadian musical performances in Toronto.<sup>58</sup> In 1942, Brebner worked on five radio programmes for NBC as part of its series on the "Lands

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58 For a Brebner contact with the *New York Times*, see his letter to Robert Van Gelder, Book Review editor, introducing the Canadian poet, E.J. Pratt; Brebner Papers, Box 3, Brebner to Van Gelder, 23 November 1943. For a contact with NBC, see the letter suggesting that NBC carry the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's 1944 performance of Healey Willan's cantata based on Pratt's poem, "Brébeuf and his Brethren"; Brebner Papers, Box 3, Brebner to Sterling Fisher, 23 November 1943.

of the Free.”<sup>59</sup> As an academic, he used his position among American historians to bring attention to Canadian scholarship through book reviews and to Canadian history through articles in American publications. He even declined a request from Creighton to review more books for the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1942, saying that he wanted to work on his manuscript for *North Atlantic Triangle* and that his second priority was “to review important Canadian publications for American periodicals.”<sup>60</sup> His continuing interest impressed his acquaintance Brooke Claxton, who as Minister of National Health and Welfare wrote him that “it is good of you to take the interest and continue to be an advance post of our country.”<sup>61</sup>

Brebner spent most of 1941 working on the manuscript for *North Atlantic Triangle*, at that point still titled *Rival Partners*. In the fall of 1942, he sent the manuscript to Creighton for his comments, and asked Innis to look at it as well. While Creighton was reviewing the manuscript, however, Brebner was engaged in a project that would set the course for his later career, writing a short history of Britain intended for Americans and particularly American servicemen in Britain, to be published under the auspices of the Council of Books in Wartime. Although Brebner had not yet published any work on British history, he had taught British history at Columbia since his arrival there, and his course on the British constitution was very popular. It is likely that Allan Nevins, Brebner’s friend and colleague at Columbia, had something to do with getting Brebner the job as Nevins had written a similar book on American history for a British audience. Nevins wrote an introductory chapter to the book. Brebner finished the 50,000 word text in ten weeks in late 1942 and early 1943, and the book was in print in the spring. The book, titled *The Making of Modern Britain*, received excellent reviews and was widely hailed, and over 600,000 copies were printed. In addition, and particularly gratifying to Brebner, was the fact that a British edition was published.<sup>62</sup>

Despite its natural tendency towards propaganda as a history of an ally written particularly for servicemen, *The Making of Modern Britain* portrays Brebner’s faith in the liberal inheritance North America had received from Britain. He wrote in the preface that it was important for Americans to know of Britain’s “cardinal significance in the story of humanity’s slow advance towards liberty and tolerance,” and said that “this book tries to show that many of the American traditions spring directly from British ideas, institutions, and practices.”<sup>63</sup>

59 Phillips, *Britain’s Past*, 79.

60 Creighton Papers, National Archives of Canada, vol. 1, file 1, “General Correspondence, 1942,” Brebner to Creighton, 18 March 1942.

61 Brebner Papers, Box 1, folder C, Brooke Claxton to Brebner, 1 December 1945.

62 Phillips, *Britain’s Past*, 79-81.

63 J.B. Brebner and Allan Nevins, *The Making of Modern Britain* (London, 1943), 11-12.

After the manuscript on Britain was finished, Brebner revised the manuscript of *North Atlantic Triangle*, based on the suggestions of Creighton, Innis, and the others, including Nevins and A.E. McFarlane of the Carnegie Endowment, who critiqued the manuscript at Brebner's request. The book was finished early in 1944, but wartime paper shortages at the Yale University Press delayed its publication until after the war in 1945.<sup>64</sup>

The timing of the publication of *North Atlantic Triangle* had great significance for the reception of the book and how it was interpreted. Had the war not intervened and the book been published under the circumstances of the late 1930s, it would likely have been the same book, contrary to Creighton's assertions of the war's importance. However it would have been seen as more directly related to the Canadian experience as one part of a single English-speaking community, and the implications that position has for the writing of Canadian history. Brebner certainly thought of it as such; so did Creighton, when he read it in the winter of 1942-43:

It seems to me [the book] ought to fulfil a very long-felt want. . . . My own book [*Dominion of the North*] which will not be ready for some time yet, is a very different thing again, for it is focused on the centre of Canada and not its periphery. I think, however, that the two books will complement each other very well.<sup>65</sup>

The comment on *North Atlantic Triangle* being about Canada's "periphery" is revealing; it suggests that even Creighton did not grasp its full implications. As a view of Canadian history, the book's main point is that the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto axis Creighton defined as the centre of Canada was not as central to its history as he thought. The influences of Britain and the United States, and the domestic changes within those two countries, affected Canada as much as the actions of Canada's own leaders. Nonetheless, he realised that the book was a counterpoint to his own, and, in those earlier days of his career, he was, it seems, able to accept opinions other than his own in a way he was not able to do later. He even acknowledges his own tendency to see things in a nationalist perspective, telling Brebner to disregard his criticism of one passage in the manuscript "since it may be merely an example of my Canadian nationalism."<sup>66</sup>

However, the political context of the immediate post-war United States, and, importantly, Brebner's wartime establishment of himself as a scholar concerned with the Anglo-American connection, ensured that *North Atlantic Triangle* would be viewed quite differently when it was published in 1945. Naturally, reviews in non-academic publications emphasised its implications

64 Phillips, *Britain's Past*, 80.

65 Brebner Papers, Box 12, Creighton to Brebner, 14 January 1943.

66 Ibid.



for international policy in the post-war world, but academics did not escape the inability to see the book in terms beyond those of international relations. In *The Canadian Forum*, John P. Humphrey summed up the book's message and its relevance in the manner typical of most popular writers on it:

But, if the North Atlantic Triangle is no longer dominant in purely Canadian-American relations, it has achieved another kind of importance in the world scene. Canada has become the junior partner in an international partnership which may yet provide the world with a model for that kind of international co-operation without which, in an age of atomic bombs, civilisation cannot survive. Writers on Canadian foreign policy, including Dr. Brebner, agree that it is in Canada's interest to promote the friendship and co-operation of the two great English-speaking countries.<sup>67</sup>

Carl Wittke wrote in the *American Historical Review* that the book "is not a history of Canada, nor of all the interrelations between the United States and Canada. . . . It is an exposition of the main factors in the development of the 'Siamese Twins of North America,' who cannot live without each other, and who, try as hard as they may, cannot extricate themselves from their relationship with Great Britain."<sup>68</sup> F.H. Soward's review in the *Canadian Historical Review* focused the most on the book's significance for the interpretation of Canadian history: "It is the author's thesis that the North Atlantic Triangle could not exist until the interlocking of the American, British, and Canadian economies had gone a long distance and until both Britain and the United States had begun to concede the existence of Canada as an independent national entity." He notes several points at which Brebner draws conclusions that seem remarkably like Canadian, rather than international or comparative, history:

The persistent central problem in Canada's external relations between 1880 and 1914 is assessed as amounting "to a kind of book-keeper's puzzle, that is computing a balance of how much Canada gained by any improvement in Anglo-American understanding as against how much she gave up in order to make it possible." The development of Canadian nationality after confederation is summarised by the verdict "that while Macdonald fought British indifference by constructing a nation, while Laurier fought centralization by refusing commitments, and while Borden fought condescension by balancing responsibility against a share in policy-making, all three aimed to enable Canada to chart her own course in the Empire and the world."

67 John P. Humphrey, review of Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle*, *The Canadian Forum* 25,298 (November 1945): 192.

68 Carl Wittke, review of Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle*, *American Historical Review* 51,2 (January 1946): 286-87.

Despite these comments directly related to the substance of Canadian national history, Soward was unable to get beyond the idea that it "may be briefly described as an interpretive essay in the field of comparative history." The focus on the Canadian side of the triangle was accepted at the author's word, as "intentional in view of the vast areas of ignorance concerning Canada which surround both Englishmen and Americans."<sup>69</sup> Soward failed to look more closely and consider whether the book might have far more to say about Canada's history than its role in international affairs.

It was at the time of *North Atlantic Triangle*'s publication that Brebner's continentalism began to come into direct conflict with the two nationalist schools of Canadian history. His contemporary concerns for the Canadian nation were not those of either political party, but Canada's interactions with the United States and Britain as he saw them from New York. This was the approach of *North Atlantic Triangle*, which was not a nation-building story, but one of the development of an English-speaking Atlantic community and its crucial importance in every step of Canada's history.<sup>70</sup> This portrait of Canada was in line with Brebner's deeply held liberal views, his anti-nationalism and faith in the heritage of British individualism, and his experience of feeling at home in the three countries of his triangle. It could be said that, in contrast to Lower's and Creighton's differing Canadian nationalisms, Brebner's nationalism was for an English-speaking Atlantic nation containing all three ends of his Atlantic triangle. It is important to consider *North Atlantic Triangle* as the logical successor to Brebner's books on the Maritimes. Just as Carl Berger suggested that W.L. Morton's views were shaped by his background in Western history, so Brebner's master narrative for Canada was influenced by his early research into a part of Canada clearly influenced by both the U.S. and Canada, and not just by his residence in the United States.<sup>71</sup>

The book could even have been considered a national history for Canada, just as much as *Colony to Nation* or *Dominion of the North* were. Interestingly, the three were published at almost exactly the same time: *Dominion* in 1944, *Triangle* in 1945, and *Colony* in 1946.<sup>72</sup> As noted above, Creighton himself seemed to note this in his letter to Brebner.<sup>73</sup> In the Carleton introduction, Creighton discussed this as well, saying that the subtitle of *The Interplay of Canada, the United States, and Great Britain*

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69 F.H. Soward, review of Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle*, *Canadian Historical Review* 27,1 (March 1946): 58-60.

70 Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle*.

71 See Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, chapter 10, "William Morton: The Delicate Balance of Region and Nation," 238-58.

72 Creighton, *Dominion of the North*; Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle*; and Lower, *Colony to Nation*.

73 Creighton to Brebner, 14 January 1943. Brebner Papers, Box 12.

seemed to imply that each of the three members of the triangle would be given equal treatment; but in his preface Brebner candidly admitted that he "had felt forced to give Canada more attention than her importance relative to the United States and Great Britain would ordinarily justify. . . ." This emphasis . . . was explained on the ground that the author "could not count upon any large amount of common knowledge" concerning Canada. . . . but [this] hardly seems a complete explanation of the bias of Brebner's book. A full and satisfactory account of the interplay of the three countries would inevitably have given Canada a very minor, and even marginal, position. But in Brebner's thought Canada was not marginal. She was still central. His interests were still concentrated upon her, as they had been in almost everything he wrote. And the real purpose of the book was to place Canada in the external circumstances which he believed had influenced her most.<sup>74</sup>

*North Atlantic Triangle* could easily have been a history of Canada. Its implications for international relations, Anglo-American co-operation, and the Cold War world drew attention from the time it was published as did the fact that it was published in the United States as well as in Canada. But, had Brebner been teaching at a Canadian university, publishing with a Canadian publisher, and remained a Canadian citizen, the book might have been seen not as a continentalist vision but as a reaction to both continentalism and nationalism. It is possible that, had Brebner remained active as a Canadianist, and especially had he returned to teach in Canada, as he had the opportunity to do in 1941, his further writings on Canadian history would have amplified this theme and provided a counterpoint to both Creighton's and Lower's nationalist nation-building narratives. Brebner gave up Canadian history, however, and thus *North Atlantic Triangle's* implications for Canada beyond international relations were never made clear.

Meanwhile, Brebner had made a decision to give up Canadian work and, in a sense, complete his removal from Canada. In a letter to two Columbia colleagues in 1945, he wrote that he had "practically decided to give up original work" on Canadian subjects.<sup>75</sup> At about this time, as well, Brebner's close friendship with Creighton seems to have come to an end. There is no indication of why, except that several apparently unanswered notes from Brebner in the Creighton Papers suggest that it was Creighton's doing. Two possibilities are that Brebner's 1944 review of *Dominion of the North*, although generally appreciative, did take Creighton to task for letting his nationalism affect his objectivity. G.W. Brown wrote to Brebner asking him to review the book for the *Canadian Historical Review*, but Brebner declined, having already (unbe-

74 Creighton, "Introduction," xxi.

75 Brebner Papers, Box 2, folder M, Brebner to Professor [?] Mills and [?] Merton, 31 January 1945.

knownst to Brown) completed a review for the *Political Science Quarterly*. Brebner added, "Maybe Donald would have objected to my review anyway."<sup>76</sup> Another possibility for the falling out is that it seems that Brebner's reticence about his change in citizenship may have extended even to the point of not telling Creighton. A draft review by Creighton of *Scholarship for Canada*, probably dating from mid-1945, calls Brebner a "good Canadian," and the rest of the piece is written with the sense that *Scholarship* was not written by a foreigner but by a patriotic national.<sup>77</sup> Strange as it may seem, it may be that Creighton did not know of Brebner's naturalisation as an American until the publicity surrounding *Scholarship* came out, and considered both himself and his country betrayed; many of the Canadian reviewers of Brebner's books of 1945, *North Atlantic Triangle* and *Scholarship*, convey the impression that Brebner was still a Canadian, which he was not.<sup>78</sup>

### The Sorrowful Exile

Although Brebner had chosen to give up his Canadian ties and his work on Canadian history in reaction to some of the excesses of Canadian nationalism, he was a reluctant exile, and, it seems, soon realised that he overreacted. "He retained a very, very deep affection for and interest in" Canada, his former student R.K. Webb wrote.<sup>79</sup> Although the fear of Canadian reaction to his status as an outsider made him resist writing on Canadian topics in the early 1940s (he initially declined both the pieces he did produce, *Scholarship for Canada* and his contribution to G.M. Brown's United Nations volume on Canada), his love of the country made him return for two summers in 1946 and 1947.<sup>80</sup> By the early 1950s, his interest in Canada had returned: he was awarded the Tyrrell Medal by the Royal Society of Canada in 1950, he completed a textbook on Canada in 1951, and attended the CHA meeting in 1952 to deliver a eulogy for Harold Innis and reviewed his last book for the *Canadian Historical Review*. By this time, however, Brebner was committed to his new field of British history, and found it impossible to return to research in Canadian history. In the 1950s, when Webb knew him well, Brebner "felt rather isolated from" Canada.<sup>81</sup>

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76 Brebner Papers, Box 10, Brebner to G.W. Brown, draft letter, undated [July 1944?].

77 Creighton Papers, vol. 1, folder labelled "General Correspondence, 1944, 2," Creighton, review of Brebner, *Scholarship for Canada*, untitled, undated typescript.

78 Brebner's naturalisation probably took place somewhere between his July 1941 letter (cited above) and December 1943. A letter of introduction from the Canadian Wartime Information Board for Brebner's 1944 Canadian visit calls him a "former Canadian"; Brebner Papers, Box 2, folder M, letter of introduction from Norman Mackenzie to "whom it may concern," 6 December 1943.

79 Webb to the author, 12 February 1996, in the author's possession.

80 *The Canadian Who's Who* 7 (1955-1957) (Toronto, 1957), 120.

81 Webb to the author, 12 February 1996, in the author's possession.

His disillusionment with the nationalism and intolerance of early Cold War America probably heightened Brebner's awareness that Canadian intolerance was no different from any other.

Brebner's last book on Canada published during his lifetime was not a work of history at all, but a far broader short book on the state of Canadian education, called *Scholarship for Canada*, published in 1945 by the Canadian Social Science Research Council (CSSRC). Harold Innis, one of Brebner's friends and someone Brebner admired very highly, was a high-ranking officer in the CSSRC, and it seems that the project was his idea. Innis certainly held views similar to those Brebner eventually wrote, including the need for Canada to hold scholars in higher esteem and to invest more in them and in universities to compete with British and American universities.<sup>82</sup> It was certainly his doing that Brebner took on the task, although Innis knew that Brebner might not want it: "I am not sure that Professor Brebner would agree to undertake [it]," he wrote, "but I know of no one who would be more acceptable, and of no opportunity which affords such great possibilities and which could have more appeal to him."<sup>83</sup> In November 1944, he wrote Brebner, "I am more and more convinced that you are the obvious person to do this and hope and pray that you will not say no. I doubt whether anyone has ever had such an opportunity to do a nation as distinct service as you will have in this."<sup>84</sup> Brebner was reluctant, writing in 1946 that "I was loath to do it, but the Council convinced me that they could not lay hands on any other outsider who had recent acquaintance with the Canadian universities."<sup>85</sup> The theme of Brebner as an outsider was clear; he wrote in the introduction to the book that he was asked to undertake it because he "was acquainted with Canada and had no axe to grind there."<sup>86</sup> Only four years earlier he had been president of the Canadian Historical Association; but in 1944, he was an "outsider" merely "acquainted" with Canadian scholarship.

Brebner's reasons for being reluctant to undertake the project are unclear. He had finally finished *North Atlantic Triangle* only a few months earlier, and he may have wanted a rest. However, other possibilities seem obvious. He might have felt the book might be too controversial, or perhaps he wanted to move on with a career he saw taking him completely away from Canadian

82 See Harold Innis's convocation address at the University of New Brunswick, May 1944, entitled "A Plea for the University Tradition." A copy is in the Brebner Papers, Box 7, folder "Scholarship for Canada."

83 Innis to David T. Stevens (Rockefeller Foundation), no date given, quoted in Donald G. Creighton, *Harold Adams Innis: Portrait of a Scholar* (Toronto, 1957), 115.

84 Brebner Papers, Box 7, folder "Scholarship for Canada," Harold Innis to Brebner, 20 November 1944.

85 Brebner Papers, Box 7, folder "Scholarship for Canada," Brebner to Ralph Flenley, 18 March 1946.

86 Brebner, *Scholarship for Canada: The Function of Graduate Studies* (Ottawa, 1945), 3.

issues. Perhaps he feared that he would not be able to be a detached, impartial observer to something he was a part of: the drain from Canada of many of its greatest minds.

In many ways, *Scholarship* turned into a personal farewell to Canada. Although Brebner maintained his scholarly objectivity throughout, a reader aware of Brebner's experience could not avoid seeing the personal and autobiographical in the book. Brebner's argument was that Canadian universities were stifling, and failed to provide the expansive atmosphere conducive to achievement. He wanted them to improve in order to retain bright individuals who were migrating to the United States. In many ways, his description of why Canadians left harkened back to his own decision not to return to the University of Toronto in 1927. Why should Canadians be found serving as doctors and scholars and businessmen in other countries, he asks:

The answers are only partly economic, perhaps not even mostly so. Other kinds of satisfactions must have been lacking as well. Pioneering young Canadians must have found that the inertia of their entrenched elders had drained Canadian life of colour, zest, adventure, and the stimulation which comes from free-ranging experimentation in ideas, in material enterprises, and in the arts. It must have been because they could not feel in Canada the sense of sharing in something more than the defence of things as they are that they left their country.<sup>87</sup>

More broadly, he considers that Canada does not allow room for the eccentricities and differences that often define advanced thought and effort:

Our climate of opinion has steadily become less favorable for the scholar's spirit of free enquiry. . . . Ideas in economics or politics which differed from the existing state of things have frequently been the signal for persecutions which have been conducted with stubborn blindness to the facts and to the future.<sup>88</sup>

This passage almost certainly alludes to the Underhill Affair, and his reference to it suggests strongly that it affected him deeply and shaped at least some of his attitudes towards Canada.

Nonetheless, the book also held out hope. Brebner said that the traditional cautious conservatism of Canada, frequently discouraging to critics and thinkers, "has been sharply contradicted by the novel and extraordinary performance of the nation since 1939. Canada certainly seems to have reached some kinds of maturity in war which can be called upon and extended in cultivating the arts of peace."<sup>89</sup>

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87 Ibid., 8.

88 Ibid., 14.

89 Ibid., 8.

Despite the personal undertones to the book, and contrary to Brebner's misgivings, *Scholarship* was well received and got significant press coverage, including articles in *Maclean's* and the *Globe and Mail*, and a radio review on the CBC.<sup>90</sup> Hugh MacLennan said the report "echoed very widely in Canada"; E.K. Brown suggested Brebner should be made president of a Canadian university.<sup>91</sup> Subsequently, Brebner was invited to give convocation addresses at several Canadian universities, to speak on themes related to the importance of scholarship to Canadian life.

A clue to Brebner's reluctance to write further Canadian history is in the convincing it took his old friend and colleague George Brown to get him to contribute a chapter to the book on Canada for the University of California's United Nations series, which Brown was editing. Brebner was concerned over having a non-Canadian contribute to the book, apparently fearing that it would damage the book's reception.<sup>92</sup> At Brown's insistence, he did write a chapter called, predictably, "The North Atlantic Triangle," which focused on the 1897-1945 period, in which *North Atlantic Triangle* suggested something of a tripartite international community had taken shape in diplomacy as well as in practice. The chapter was included among those discussing Canada's external relations and was fashioned to emphasise this aspect of the triangle, probably at Brown's request.

Brebner's project of a textbook history of Canada may demonstrate his changing feelings towards, and interest in, Canadian history. In 1946, he accepted an assignment from the Oxford University Press to write a 50,000 word history of Canada for their Home University Library series, although he told the editor that "I have no wish or intention to write another short book on Canada [other than this one]. In fact, I have turned down at least three invitations to do so."<sup>93</sup> Money may have been the prime consideration. He worked on it for a year, but he never finished the project; his letters to the publisher blame his teaching for distracting him. Only four years earlier, however, he had completed a 50,000 word history of Britain in ten weeks of the teaching year of 1942-1943. It is difficult to accept that he could have had that much difficulty

90 "Why Canadians Leave Home," *Maclean's*, 15 February 1946, 2; "Precious Export," *Time*, 14 January 1946, 36-38; *Globe & Mail*, 1 July 1946, clipping in Brebner Papers, Box 7, folder "Canadian Universities - Correspondence & Reviews." For the CBC review, see Brebner Papers, Box 7, folder "Canadian Universities - Correspondence & Reviews," "Books for the Times," typescript of CBC radio broadcast, James R. Scott, ex Toronto, 7:45-8:00 pm EDT, 28 May 1946.

91 Brebner Papers, Box 7, folder "Scholarship for Canada," Hugh MacLennan to Jean [?], 8 July 1946. E.K. Brown, review of Brebner, *Scholarship for Canada*, *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 12,4 (November 1946): 521-24.

92 Brebner Papers, Box 6, Brebner to George W. Brown, 30 April 1947.

93 Brebner Papers, Box 3, folder C, Brebner to William H. Crawford, Jr., 25 October 1946.

completing a similar-sized book, on a topic he knew better, in a full 12 months. Either he was uninterested, or he was reluctant to write it. In October 1947, by mutual consent with the publisher, the project was dropped.<sup>94</sup>

Brebner did get around to finishing the history of Canada he started for the Oxford series, in a much longer form (250,000 words rather than 50,000), in 1951. Eventually it was published posthumously in 1960 as *Canada: A Modern History*, but the 1951 manuscript retains the Oxford title of *The Making of Modern Canada*.<sup>95</sup> It was to be part of a series edited by Allan Nevins, Brebner's Columbia colleague, to be directed at an American readership, but apparently the project was dropped by the publisher. The manuscript was published posthumously after the University of Michigan Press picked up the series. That Allan Nevins was directing the series probably had much to do with Brebner's acceptance of the assignment, but it also seems that the writing of the book coincided with a renewal of Brebner's interest in Canada, or perhaps it marked the point when he overcame his disillusionment with it. That he was awarded the Tyrrell Medal of the Royal Society of Canada in 1950 may have also helped convince him that he was not as unwelcome in Canada as he had supposed.<sup>96</sup> Either way, the book was not published during Brebner's lifetime.

Brebner's last major commentaries on Canada were three articles in 1951 and 1952 prompted by the report of the Royal Commission on Canadian Arts, Letters, and Sciences, generally known as the Massey Commission. Brebner was highly critical of the report, which was concerned with creating a distinctive national culture for Canada, and of using the government to fund, organise, and enforce that culture. Many of his criticisms, especially those regarding the need for a "mature" sense of nationhood careful to preserve regional diversity, echoed themes from his 1940 speech as CHA president:

What seems to be lacking [in the Massey Report] is faith in the persistence of diversity, in the United States as well as in a Canada believed threatened by monolithic "intellectual and moral annexation." Nationality can flourish, as freedom does, in variety. Vancouver and Seattle, Winnipeg and Minneapolis, Toronto and New York, Halifax and Boston, not to speak of other centres, have more in common with each other than with their respective national capitals. French Canada is still a thing apart. So far the strengths of many regional and traditional cultures in North America have given the continent its fresh-

94 See correspondence between Brebner and William H. Crawford, Jr., 1946-1947. Brebner Papers, Box 3, folder C, especially the letter from Brebner to Crawford, 14 October 1947.

95 Brebner, *Canada: A Modern History*. The University of Michigan History of the Modern World. Allan Nevins and Howard M. Ehrmann, eds. (Ann Arbor, 1960). See the manuscript of the book in the Brebner Papers, Box 14. The preface and foreword are exactly as published in 1960 without a date, but the manuscript "Author's preface" is signed and dated "February 1951."

96 *Kingston Whig-Standard*, 7 June 1950.



ness, its rich variety, and its liberty. It would be a pity (and illiberal) if a fearful Canada risked its birthright in quest of an over-unified cultural nationalism.<sup>97</sup>

He elaborated on this theme in a longer article in *The Saturday Review of Literature*:

[I]t would have been healthier and more realistic to subordinate the negative and defensive to the positive and the outgoing, and, above all, to stress variety as the nurture of free development. . . . One could wish that the "Report" was less alarmist about American menaces to Canadian culture and more confident that many Canadians had sturdy cultural interests of their own which, pursued to fruition, might benefit both Canada and a world always interested in high achievement regardless of its origin. A mature Canada could borrow without guilt and give without boast. That condition can hardly be said to be reflected in the "Report." In spite of some eloquent instances of vision into the future, for the most part present fears and propagandistic urgency rob it of philosophic depth.<sup>98</sup>

Brebner's liberal vision of a healthy Canadianism had never waned.

### A Disillusioned American?

Nonetheless, Brebner was beginning to be more understanding of Canadian nationalism, more appreciative of its criticisms of the United States, and less idealistic about the United States in general. After World War II, he had spoken against the massive American military build-up, saying that while "Britain conveyed the impression of being fearless, although it was not," the world now found the U.S. "inexplicably frightened, and we add to the impression by behaving like a rich man who, caught in a poor group, is willing to pay for protection."<sup>99</sup> The anti-communist frenzy of the early Cold War particularly worried him, demonstrating as it did the same intolerance in the United States that had so upset him about Canada in the Underhill Affair and before. In 1950, one of his Ph.D. students at Columbia, a Canadian, missed his comprehensive examinations because he was taken off a train by U.S. immigration officials and questioned at length about his political beliefs.<sup>100</sup> The 1952 presidential campaign caused deep concern for certain liberal Columbia professors, because the Republican candidate, Dwight D. Eisenhower, was Columbia's president at the

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97 Brebner, "North American Culture: The Massey Report," *Times Educational Supplement* (London), 20 July 1951, 583.

98 Brebner, "In Search of a Canadian Accent," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 1 September 1951, 8.

99 From a 1948 speech to Columbia alumni, called "The Contracting British Empire: Its Meaning for America," quoted in Phillips, *Britain's Past*, 86.

100 Phillips, *Britain's Past*, 88.

time; further, he had chosen Richard Nixon as his running mate, a Congressman who had made his name in the anti-communist investigation – some would say persecution – of Alger Hiss. In October 1952, in response to a public statement by several Columbia professors, including Brebner, he and several of his colleagues were called "pinkos" by the New York *Daily News*.<sup>101</sup> In 1955, Brebner was part of the Columbia delegation to the Soviet Union to attend the celebrations for the 200th anniversary of Moscow University, which had sent representatives to Columbia's own bicentennial the year before.<sup>102</sup>

If Brebner began to take a more understanding view of Canadian nationalism, and the anti-Americanism that it entailed, it was probably also because of the increasing nationalism of Harold Innis. Brebner highly respected Innis: "[T]here is no question but that he thought H.A. Innis was pretty close to God," his student R.K. Webb recalled. Innis's turn towards nationalism disturbed Brebner gravely.<sup>103</sup> Speaking of Innis's denunciation of American communications as undermining Canada's independence, Brebner wrote him in 1949, "You seem to be attributing exclusive causal force to a partial thing. It's odd in you because the roots of liberty for you are in pluralism."<sup>104</sup> Yet Innis had lost faith in the pluralism that Brebner believed in so strongly: he "deliberately abandoned all hope for liberty in Canada based upon its social and cultural variety."<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, in Brebner's last article on the Massey Report, a lead editorial for a special edition of *The Saturday Review* devoted to Canada, Brebner wrote that Americans could learn much about their own shortcomings as a society by listening to Canadians' criticisms:

"We are indeed fighting for our lives. . . . The jackals of communication systems are constantly on the alert to destroy every vestige of sentiment toward Great Britain, holding it to no advantage if it threatens the omnipotence of American commercialism. This is to strike at the heart of cultural life in Canada." The writer of these words is not some obsessed, excited nationalist, but Dean H.A. Innis of the University of Toronto, the most respected student and interpreter of Canada. . . . Americans, as well as Canadians, should ponder what he has to say. For Canadian fears are the best available mirror held up to the United States. . . . If we could keep our tempers about their wry reflections of us, they could teach us a lot.<sup>106</sup>

101 Ibid., 88-89.

102 "Signs of Freedom found in Soviet by Visiting Columbia Professor," *New York Times*, 19 May 1955.

103 Quotation from letter, R.K. Webb to the author, 12 February 1996, in the author's possession.

104 Brebner to Innis, 19 March 1949. Quoted in Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 193.

105 Brebner, "Harold Adams Innis as Historian," *Canadian Historical Association Report* 1953, 23.

106 Brebner, "Our Mirror in Canadian Fears," *The Saturday Review*, 7 June 1952, 24-25.

Although Brebner had never considered the United States a completely benign neighbour to Canada, he had never before given quite so much credit to the nationalists' criticisms. Now, as he found himself identifying with a liberal American intellectual minority gravely concerned about where the United States was headed, he found their arguments relevant not only for Canada but also as criticisms of the United States. In 1954, he was invited to deliver Columbia's bicentennial convocation address; the speech, entitled "Humility," referred to the virulent anti-communism in the same terms as he had in *Scholarship* alluded to the Underhill Affair: "During recent years, a hurricane of investigations and persecutions has lashed those parts of the earth where men in political authority have conceived themselves to be compelled to maintain one set of values and to attack all others," he said.<sup>107</sup> Still, he could not accept Innis's belief that mass communications had wiped out all hope for the diversity of American and Canadian life. "Although he knew that the United States possessed powerful traditions of libertarian and of anti-materialistic sorts," Brebner sorrowfully wrote in Innis's obituary in the *Canadian Historical Review*, "he chose to ignore them in order to emphasise the authoritarian [and] materialistic."<sup>108</sup>

Brebner's few articles on Canada did not represent the total of his prodigious scholarly output. In the late 1940s, Brebner was in great demand as a speaker and public commentator, primarily because of the political timeliness of *North Atlantic Triangle*. His appearances included the English-Speaking Union and short courses on international relations and the history of the Atlantic triangle at both the National War College in Washington, D.C., and the National Defence College in Kingston, Ontario. He turned his research interest to industrialisation in Victorian Britain and published his first article on British history in 1952; at his death, he had begun work on a history of industrial Britain.<sup>109</sup> His reputation in Britain and the United States was quite high: he was the visiting Pitt Professor at Cambridge in 1954-1955; he had been asked by Columbia to deliver the university's bicentennial convocation address in 1954; and he was offered (but declined) the editorship of the *Journal of Economic History* in 1955.<sup>110</sup>

When Brebner died in November 1957, his reputation remained high in Canada. Even after his articles against the Massey Report, and shortly before Brebner's death, Vincent Massey himself referred publicly to Brebner as "a

107 Quoted in Phillips, *Britain's Past*, 90.

108 Brebner, "Harold Adams Innis," 23.

109 Brebner, "Laissez Faire and State Intervention in Nineteenth Century Britain," *Journal of Economic History*, Supplement VIII, 1948, 59-73; the British history manuscript is mentioned in "John Bartlet Brebner," *Political Science Quarterly*, 73,1 (March 1958): 162.

110 *Who's Who in America 1956-57* (Chicago, 1956), 302; Phillips, *Britain's Past*, 90; Brebner Papers, Box 2, folder G, Carter Goodrich to Brebner, 27 January 1955.

well-known American historian who is still to all Canadians a Canadian” and praised *North Atlantic Triangle*.<sup>111</sup> But his long absence from the Canadian scene had made Brebner regarded as part of an older and somewhat obsolete generation. In an admiring obituary in *The Canadian Forum*, W.L. Morton wrote that “the [Carnegie] Series and *North Atlantic Triangle* belong to the mood of a generation which is passing, and . . . Canadian-American relations must henceforth be discussed in more detached and sophisticated terms.”<sup>112</sup> Morton saw the lasting value of *Triangle* and even saw its deep implications for Canada:

[E]ven if many Canadian historians are compelled to dig more deeply than their predecessors into the processes by which the Canadian nation was formed, that a number will always be drawn to the endlessly fascinating and always inevitable subject of Canadian-American relations. For them during many years Brebner’s *Triangle* will remain the text book, the point of take-off. It will be well if they acquire from it something of his steady vision and candid temper.<sup>113</sup>

In his 1961 *The Canadian Identity*, Morton further gave Brebner credit he would cease to have after the 1960 textbook and the Carleton introductions appeared.<sup>114</sup> Rather than lumping Brebner together with the continentalists, Morton says that the Carnegie Series “was only saved from a complete overemphasis on the continental ties by the insistence of the Canadian scholars, A.L. Burt, D.G. Creighton, and J.B. Brebner, that the British connection had been midwife to Canadian nationhood.”<sup>115</sup>

### The Marginalisation of John Bartlet Brebner

Brebner’s good reputation did not survive him for long. Two events damaged it and thus marginalised him: the posthumous publication of the 1951 manuscript textbook, and a concerted attack on continentalism led most vituperatively by Donald G. Creighton. Many reviewers explained the outdated nature of the textbook, which appeared in 1960, by ascribing it to an American perspective; this, in turn, made it more credible for Creighton to attack Brebner’s most significant book, *North American Triangle*, as a period piece overly influenced by the naïve cross-border goodwill of wartime.

111 This was during a 13 March 1953 speech to the Canadian Club of the Niagara Frontier, reported in the *Canadian Weekly Bulletin* issued by the Information Division of the Department of External Affairs, 20 March 1953, 2. A copy is in the Brebner Papers, Box 6.

112 W.L. Morton, “John Bartlet Brebner,” *Canadian Forum*, 37,443 (December 1957): 195.

113 *Ibid.*, 195.

114 W.L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1961). It is likely that Morton’s book, although published in 1961 — the year after Brebner’s textbook appeared — was written before Morton saw Brebner’s textbook; certainly Brebner’s book had not been reviewed before Morton’s appeared.

115 Morton, *The Canadian Identity*, 72.

### An Out-Dated Textbook

After Brebner's death, his 1951 manuscript textbook was published as *Canada: A Modern History*. When it was finally published in 1960, the book was poorly received, and probably played a large part in damaging Brebner's reputation after his death. It was poorly edited, and reviewers noted that some of the writing was rough; C.P. Stacey wished that the publisher had "put Brebner's manuscript into the hands of a competent and well-informed editor, who could have done for it at least part of what the author might have done had he been spared."<sup>116</sup>

More importantly, the book's reviewers saw it as out of step with the current historical interpretations, and ascribed the difference to Brebner's Americanness. None of the reviews noted that Brebner had finished the manuscript in early 1951 and not worked on it since; none of Brebner's historiographers note this either. Thus, the criticism involved holding a book written in 1950 up to the standards of Canadian history ten years later. For example, one of Stacey's criticisms was of Brebner's "emphasis on the fundamental influence of interested financiers upon policy in the federation era, although he admits that the evidence is incomplete."<sup>117</sup> Stacey saw this as an example of his claim that the "book's basic political assumption are American."<sup>118</sup> It is more likely that it reflected the thinking of a period before Creighton's 1952 and 1955 biographies of Sir John A. Macdonald and J.M.S. Careless's 1959 first volume of his biography of George Brown had shed a far more personal light on the politics of Confederation.<sup>119</sup> Carl Berger suggested that the 1950s witnessed a dramatic change in the interests of Canadian scholarship: "by the later 1950s the dominant form of historical writing was political biography; economic history was in almost total eclipse."<sup>120</sup> When Brebner wrote the textbook, however, in 1950, the focus on economics – including the significance of the financiers – was an up-to-date Canadian interpretation.

The intense nationalism with which Creighton had imbued Canadian history in this period suggests further that Brebner's work would have been considered less "American" had it been published when written and not a decade later; if nothing else, the editors certainly did Brebner a disservice by deleting the date from the author's foreword, which is dated "February 1951" on the manuscript but neither signed nor dated in the published version. Stacey allows

116 C.P. Stacey, review of Brebner, *Canada: A Modern History*, *Canadian Historical Review* 24,1 (March 1961): 56.

117 *Ibid.*, 56.

118 *Ibid.*, 55.

119 Creighton, *Sir John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician*; Creighton, *Sir John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain*; J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe: The Voice of Upper Canada, 1818-1859* (Toronto, 1959).

120 Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 160.

that, although he senses an Americanism about the book, "I do not suggest that Brebner's interpretation of Anglo-American or Canadian-American issues is unduly favorable to the United States; it is not."<sup>121</sup>

### **Damnation with Faint Praise: The (Un)Making of Brebner's Reputation**

Despite the publication of the textbook, Brebner's reputation probably would have remained intact as a thoughtful Canadian historian. However, as Morton had noted, his long time away from producing new Canadian scholarship had led him to be considered part of a passing generation, and relatively little was written about him. However, in the politically charged atmosphere of the 1960s, two introductions to reprints of his books set the tone for future historiography to consider him as a Canadian who had "lost faith" in Canada and turned to the United States, and thus whose work could be discounted. His reputation never recovered, and even his defenders accepted this criticism.

The first article after Brebner's death placing him in an historiographical context was Donald Creighton's introduction to the Carleton Library edition of *North Atlantic Triangle*, which appeared in 1966.<sup>122</sup> Creighton was not an impartial commentator on the book, however, and Brebner's reputation has not yet recovered from the way Creighton interpreted him. He credited Brebner with "having suggested a new method – the continental approach to Canadian history":

The "continental approach" to Canadian history was not so novel as [Brebner] had imagined; but it had never before been so fashionable as it was in the 1930's. "You and I differ widely in our general views," Goldwin Smith had once written to John A. Macdonald, "You regard Canada as a part of the British Empire. I as a community of the New World." Macdonald might very well have replied that Canada was both, and that the two views of it were historically perfectly compatible. He would not have persuaded Goldwin Smith, that patron saint of all Canadian continentalists; and he would equally have failed to convince the much less intellectually able continentalists of the 1930's.<sup>123</sup>

Thus began Creighton's damnation of Brebner, only lightly veiled as faint praise. The pairing of Brebner with Goldwin Smith, and the charge that he and the other continentalists were "less intellectually able" were things a younger Creighton would never have said to the Brebner who, in the 1930s and 1940s, acted virtually as a mentor to him. Further, the term "continentalism" had changed in meaning over the course of time. The continentalism Brebner pro-

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121 Stacey, *Canada: A Modern History*, 56.

122 Creighton, Introduction to the Carleton Library edition of *North Atlantic Triangle*, xiii-xxiii.

123 *Ibid.*, xviii.

posed in 1931 involved the scholarly approach of comparing Canada and the United States; when Creighton used it in the 1960s, however, it had come to be associated with a supposed political outlook that Canada was no more than an extension of the United States and should integrate further with, if not be annexed by, its southern neighbour. As noted earlier, in Creighton's view, Brebner was a threat because his view conflicted with Creighton's "Conservative Party" portrayal of a Canada struggling against the American threat in *Dominion of the North* and the Macdonald biographies.<sup>124</sup>

Creighton called *North Atlantic Triangle* Brebner's "most characteristic book, and, for that very reason, probably his best."<sup>125</sup> He accounted for the apparent inconsistency between his claim that Brebner was a continentalist with the book's obvious appreciation of the importance of Britain by stating that he had never meant to include Britain, but that continentalism did not work, and that events proved to Brebner that he had made a mistake:

[T]he lesson of the years 1939-1944 was plain. . . . there was, he felt, an enormous omission. He had left Great Britain out. He had assumed, like the continentalists, that North America was self-sufficient and that the history of the United States and Canada and of their relationship with each other was self-explanatory. This assumption, he now recognized, was mistaken. North America could not be explained in purely North American terms.<sup>126</sup>

This was a strange charge given that Creighton himself had read Brebner's manuscript, corresponded with Brebner extensively throughout the 1930s, and knew that the *Triangle* manuscript was finished in 1942; he probably also knew that Brebner had first described a "British-Canadian-American Triangle" in 1940.<sup>127</sup> But Creighton painted Brebner as a simplistic continentalist, set his book aside as a relic, and gave Brebner himself the reputation of being a smart man, yes, but, above all, "a man of his times," who only belatedly realised the error he had committed in looking at Canada in North American terms.

Creighton's patronising tone towards Brebner, and the charge of oversimplification in the Carnegie Series in which he played a major role, was amplified three years later by W.S. MacNutt's introduction to the Carleton Library's edition of Brebner's third book, the 1937 *Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia*.<sup>128</sup>

124 Creighton, *Dominion of the North*; Sir John A. Macdonald: *The Young Politician*; and Sir John A. Macdonald: *The Old Chieftain*.

125 Creighton, "Introduction," xiii.

126 Ibid., xx.

127 The Creighton and Brebner Papers hold their correspondence regarding *North Atlantic Triangle*. See Brebner Papers, Box 12, and Creighton Papers, vol. 1, folder "General Correspondence, 1943." For Brebner's article mentioning the triangle, see "The U.S.A.: Canada's Problem," *Survey Graphic* 30,4 (April 1941): 221-25, which was based on a presentation at the Couchiching Conference, August 1940.

128 MacNutt, "Introduction," xi-xviii.

The Carnegie Series . . . was conceived and written on the premises that Canadians and Americans are remarkably alike, that past differences are of little consequence [and] that no important differences could possibly occur in the future. *North Atlantic Triangle* was written to compensate for this maladjustment of emphasis.<sup>129</sup>

Although crediting Brebner with correcting the excesses seen in the Carnegie Series, MacNutt suggested that Brebner's appreciation of Britain in *Triangle* was short-lived, and that he retreated into an American-based continentalism later in his career, saying that his textbook history of Canada, published posthumously in 1960,<sup>130</sup> "views Canada from an approach more American than Canadian. Perhaps Brebner in his last years became more continentalist, more engrossed with Canada as a curious collection of fragments bypassed in the march of American Manifest Destiny."<sup>131</sup> Although MacNutt's view of *North Atlantic Triangle* was apparently more nuanced than Creighton's, MacNutt accepted Creighton's main charge because of the impact of the posthumous textbook.

The damage of the two Carleton introductions was long lasting. When Carl Berger wrote the standard text on Canadian historiography, he did not give Brebner his own chapter, but included him in the story of the Carnegie Series under the heading "A North American Nation." Berger amplified Creighton's thesis that Brebner was so highly influenced by the continental spirit of the age that it blinded him until late to the importance of Britain; this was Creighton's implication in the titling of the reprinted Carleton introduction "A Man of His Times." Further, Berger took up Creighton's theme of Brebner not as an historian but as an example of an age past, by summing up the chapter with a quote from Brebner suggesting that works of history can serve the dual purpose of the history told but also of revealing the interests, needs, and viewpoints of the age in which it is written. Such an obvious suggestion that Brebner's works were relics amplified Creighton's argument.<sup>132</sup>

Brebner's main defender in the historiography was George Rawlyk.<sup>133</sup> Rawlyk, as a Maritime historian, suggested that the reason Brebner was poorly treated in Berger's work, and under-appreciated in general, was that his main works of research dealt with Maritime history:

129 Ibid., xvii.

130 Brebner, *Canada: A Modern History*.

131 MacNutt, "Introduction," xvii.

132 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*. See especially chapter 6, "A North American Nation," 137-59. The Brebner quotation on the uses of historians of the past is on page 159.

133 G.A. Rawlyk, "J.B. Brebner and *The Writing of Canadian History*." Also see G.A. Rawlyk, "J.B. Brebner and Some Recent Trends in Eighteenth-Century Maritime Historiography," in *They Planted Well: New England Planters in Maritime Canada*, Margaret Conrad, ed., (Fredericton, 1988), 97-119.



It has been extremely difficult, until quite recently, to fit Maritime history into a Canadian historical tradition which appears to have been almost overwhelmed by a sense of unlimited size, space and abundance. . . . [and] preoccupied with the westward thrust of Central Canada and . . . tension between English- and French-speaking inhabitants. . . . it is not surprising that Berger's *The Writing of Canadian History*, in its treatment of the Maritimes and therefore Brebner, faithfully reflects this largely negative stereotype . . .<sup>134</sup>

To Rawlyk, Brebner was a great Canadian historian because he established the definition of eighteenth-century history for the Maritime region, and because his interpretation, despite the flaws Rawlyk himself had spent much of his career correcting, was a lasting and significant achievement.

Even Rawlyk, however, accepted that Brebner's other works were tainted because of continental politics:

Perhaps there was a continentalist bias in *The North American* [sic] *Triangle*. . . . [for some] Brebner's continentalist bias in his later writing and the fact that he had abandoned the University of Toronto for Columbia were good enough reasons for his not being included in Berger's pantheon. He had lost faith in Canada; and Canadians were justified in losing faith in him.<sup>135</sup>

Rawlyk soundly argued for the inclusion of Brebner as a Maritime historian, but he accepted the diminished role for Brebner's later work that Creighton prescribes; the editing error giving the title as the "American Triangle" shows an internalisation of the same message. This is doubly ironic, given the extent to which Brebner's Maritime interests led him into the interpretation of Canada most clearly seen in *North Atlantic Triangle*. Finally, it would seem from Brebner's obituaries that Canadians contemporary to Brebner had not lost faith in him because of his departure from Canada.

## Conclusion

Through a combination of bad luck, political prejudice, and his early death, John Bartlet Brebner has been marginalised and misinterpreted by Canadian historiography. Far from abandoning Canada due to a preference for the United States, he continued to focus on Canada as a professor at Columbia, and changed his citizenship apparently out of desperation at a perceived Canadian political narrow-mindedness. He seems to have spent the rest of his life regretting this decision, and soon realised that American politics could be even more narrow-minded and intolerant than Canadian. His concept of considering Canadian history within a continental and North Atlantic context also did not

134 Rawlyk, "J.B. Brebner and *The Writing of Canadian History*," 87.

135 Ibid., 86-87.

derive from a “American” viewpoint, but mainly from his Nova Scotia research, his teaching and writing on Britain, and his book on North America in a period before national boundaries.

The possibility remained that Brebner could have written more on Canadian history and applied his triangle in more detail, perhaps using the same microstudy approach in the Maritime books and in his study of Canada’s role in ending the Anglo-Japanese alliance. But Canadian nationalism had scared him away from the subject, making him, inaccurately, more often than not, feel unwelcome in many circles of Canadian scholarship. His fears about being excluded proved true later in life and after his death: Creighton seems to have broken off his friendship with Brebner after Creighton’s turn towards nationalism and Brebner’s naturalisation as an American, and the articles on Brebner in the 1960s painted him as a simplistic continentalist. His absence from Canadian scholarship since 1945 made him seem dated to the new generation of historians, and thus allowed the nationalists to attack his reputation in a way that did lasting damage and marginalised him. Had he continued to write Canadian history – the more detailed, less broad history of the newer generation — he could have kept the *North Atlantic Triangle* alive as an interpretation not just of international relations but also of Canadian history, and thus helped to maintain a perspective that much of the nationalist history lost. It might also have allowed a later generation of Canadian historians to see his work as probably demonstrative of the consensus school of American history, in which the Columbia History Department played a major role, and thus critique it on a more sound level that might have inspired further work rather than outright rejection. As it was, though, the nationalism that offended Brebner enough to make him give up Canadian history not only kept him from contributing further but pushed his earlier contributions aside as well.